# the avatar of nature and choice

by

## 1. Lira and the grove.

I stand in the third row, hands folded just so, eyes lowered to the polished stone beneath my feet. The cathedral is filled with the scent of incense—sweet and heavy, clinging to the air like a secret. Light streams through stained glass, painting the congregation in colors that shift and swim as the sun moves.

Father's voice rises above the choir, clear and commanding. I sneak a glance at him—robed in white and gold, his face calm and certain. Everyone listens when he speaks. Even the old men in the front pew bow their heads. I mouth the words of the Creed, careful not to stumble. "We are unworthy, yet we strive for the Light's embrace." My voice is small, but I hope it's enough. I hope he hears me. The congregation repeats the prayer, voices blending into a single, trembling note. I try to feel the love they speak of, the unconditional grace promised in every sermon. But mostly I feel the weight of eyes, the pressure to be perfect, the fear of being noticed for the wrong reason.

Father lifts his arms. "The Light loves all who strive. But those who falter must seek correction, for the path is narrow and the shadows are many."

I nod, just like everyone else. I want to be good. I want to be seen, but only in the right way. I want Father to look at me the way he looks at the altar—like something holy. The choir sings. My throat is tight. I sing anyway. When the service ends, Father's gaze sweeps over the crowd. For a moment, I think he sees me. My heart leaps, but his eyes move on. I follow the line of worshippers out into the cold stone hallway, my hands still trembling, my mind replaying every word I said, every note I sang. Was it enough? Did I do it right?

The cathedral doors close behind us, and the hush of the sanctuary is replaced by the echo of footsteps on stone. Mother walks ahead, her veil fluttering in the breeze. Father's hand rests on my shoulder, heavy and guiding, steering me through the crowd of parishioners offering him blessings and praise. He nods to each of them, his voice warm and steady. "Go in the Light." "Peace upon your house." I keep my head down, afraid to meet anyone's eyes. I feel small beside him—smaller still when he doesn't look at me.

We walk in silence, the city's noise creeping in at the edges. I watch the cobblestones pass beneath my shoes, counting them to calm my nerves. My hands are cold, tucked into my sleeves. I wonder if Father noticed how hard I tried today. I wonder if he'll say anything when we get home. Mother unlocks the door and disappears into the kitchen. The house is quiet, every surface scrubbed clean, every picture frame perfectly straight. Father hangs his ceremonial robe by the door, smoothing the fabric with careful hands. He turns to me, and my heart skips. His eyes are unreadable.

"Come here, Lira."

I obey, my feet heavy as stone.

He kneels to my level, his face close to mine. For a moment, I hope he'll tell me I did well, that he's proud. But his voice is low and cold.

"You were careless during the Creed. You mumbled. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

My mouth goes dry. I shake my head, but the words won't come. He sighs—a long, disappointed sound. "You know what is expected of you. The Light sees all. I see all. You must strive harder, Lira. Unworthiness cannot be tolerated."

He stands, taller than the doorway, and gestures for me to follow. Father leads me down the hall, his grip firm on my shoulder. My heart pounds so loudly I wonder if he can hear it. The hallway feels longer than usual, the air thick and heavy.

Mother steps out of the kitchen, a wooden spoon in her hand. She sees us—sees Father's face, sees mine. For a moment, her eyes meet mine. I want her to say something, to stop him, to pull me into her arms the way mothers do in stories. But she just stands there, lips pressed into a thin line. She looks away, back into the kitchen, and closes the door behind her. The spoon clatters softly on the counter. I hear her humming, or maybe it's just the kettle starting to boil.

Her silence is louder than any words. It feels like agreement. Like I deserve this.

Father opens the door to the study. The room is cold, the curtains drawn. He closes the door behind us, leaving the world outside. He unbuckles his belt, slow and deliberate.

"You must learn, Lira," he says, voice flat. "The Light demands discipline."

I nod, even though my throat is tight. I want to scream. I want to run. But I stand still, because I know what happens if I don't.

The belt stings as sharply as always. Father's face is a mask of cold indifference. I don't understand. How can I be worthy of his love? The lashes keep coming. I try to protect my face, but it seems to do little.

It hurts.

I count the blows, but I lose track. My mind drifts to the stained glass in the cathedral, the way the colors danced on the floor. I wish I could disappear into the light. Finally, out of breath, Father gives me a moment of reprieve. He leaves the room. The door doesn't quite latch behind him.

My legs are shaking, but I move. I move because staying means more hurting. I move because maybe—just maybe—there's something else out there. I slip out the door, past the kitchen where Mother stirs her soup, eyes fixed on the pot. She doesn't look up. I step into the cold night, the air biting at my skin, and I run.

The night air is colder than I expected. It bites at my skin, sharp and wild, making every bruise ache. My breath comes in little clouds. I run, but I don't know where I'm going—only that I have to keep moving, away from the house, away from Father's voice, away from Mother's silence.

The village is quiet, all the windows shuttered against the dark. I slip through alleys and side streets, heart thudding in my chest. Every shadow feels like a hand reaching for me. Every sound—a dog barking, a door creaking—makes me flinch. What if someone sees me? What if Father comes after me? What if I'm caught and dragged back home?

My legs are trembling, but I don't stop. I can't stop. The pain in my side is nothing compared to the fear clawing at my insides. I think of the service, the prayers, the way everyone looked at Father like he was something holy. I wonder if maybe they're right—maybe there's something wrong with me. Maybe I really am unworthy. Maybe this is what I deserve.

A sob escapes before I can swallow it. I press my fist to my mouth, trying to be quiet. I don't want anyone to hear me. I don't want anyone to see me like this.

The last houses fall away and the forest rises up, black and endless. The trees sway in the wind, their branches whispering secrets I can't understand. I hesitate at the edge, fear rooting me to the spot. What if the stories are true? What if there are monsters in the woods? What if I disappear and no one ever finds me?

But then I remember the study, the belt, the way Mother wouldn't meet my eyes. I remember how small I felt, how invisible. The forest can't be worse than that. I step into the darkness, the village fading behind me. Every branch that snaps underfoot makes me jump. Every gust of wind sounds like my father calling my name.

I keep walking, even though my knees are shaking, even though my heart is pounding so hard I think it might break. I keep walking, because I have nowhere else to go. Because I'd rather be lost than go back.

The trees swallow me whole. The village lights vanish behind me, replaced by a darkness so thick it feels like a living thing. Branches tangle above my head, hiding the moon. My feet crunch on dead leaves and twigs, every sound impossibly loud in the hush. I don't know where I'm going. My legs move on their own, stumbling over roots and rocks. I bite my lip to keep from crying out. If Father's looking for me, I don't want him to hear. The cold seeps through my clothes, settling into my bones. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to remember the last time I felt warm. My skin aches where the belt struck, every step a reminder. I want to stop, to curl up and disappear, but I'm too afraid to stand still. What if there are wolves out here? Or worse? The stories say the forest is full of spirits and shadows. I wonder if they're watching me now, judging me the way Father does.

I stumble over a fallen branch and land hard on my knees. The pain brings tears, hot and sudden. I press my face into my hands, trying to smother the sound. Why did I run? What if I've made everything worse? Maybe I should have stayed, taken my punishment, tried harder to be good. Maybe I really am broken, like Father says.

But I won't go back. I can't.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. The forest is silent, except for the wind sighing through the leaves. It doesn't sound angry. It doesn't sound like Father at all. For the first time tonight, I listen. The wind feels almost gentle, brushing my cheek like a question. I sit there, hugging my knees, shivering. I don't pray. I don't know what to pray for anymore. I just breathe, in and out, trying to make myself smaller, quieter, invisible.

Somewhere above, a branch creaks. I flinch, heart racing. But nothing comes. No footsteps, no voices, just the slow, steady breathing of the forest.

I'm alone. I'm scared. But the world hasn't ended. Not yet. I close my eyes and listen to the wind. For a moment, it almost feels like someone is with me—someone who isn't angry, someone who doesn't want me to be anything but here. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't even know if I'll make it through the night. But for now, I am not in the house. I am not being hurt. I am here, in the dark, with the trees and the wind and the ache in my chest. And for the first time, I let myself hope that maybe, just maybe, there is something else waiting for me out here.

I curl up beneath a thick tangle of roots, trying to make myself as small as possible. My body aches—cold seeping into every bone, hunger gnawing at my stomach, and the bruises burning beneath my clothes. I close my eyes, hoping for sleep, but it won't come. Instead, the night wraps around me, alive with sounds.

A twig snaps somewhere nearby, sharp and sudden. My breath catches. I hold still, heart pounding like a drum. Nothing moves. Just the wind whispering through the leaves. Far off, an owl calls—a lonely, haunting sound that makes the darkness feel deeper. I imagine its eyes, bright and unblinking, watching me from the shadows. I want to be brave, but the ache in my chest tightens.

The rustle of leaves shifts again, softer this time, like a secret being told between the trees. I strain to listen, trying to catch the words. The forest is full of life, but none of it feels like danger. It feels… patient. Waiting. I breathe in the cold air, sharp and clean. It fills my lungs and clears my mind, even if just a little. A breeze stirs the branches above, and for a moment, I think I hear a voice—not words, but something like a song. It's gentle and wild, like the wind itself. The sound wraps around me, soothing and strange. I want to reach out, to follow it, but my limbs are heavy with fear and exhaustion.

I open my eyes and look up through the gaps in the canopy. The stars are scattered across the sky, distant and cold. Sleep won't come tonight. But maybe, just maybe, this night is the beginning of something new.

The night grows colder. My arms are wrapped tight around my knees, and my eyes burn with tiredness, but I can't let myself sleep. Every sound in the dark feels sharper, closer, more dangerous.

Then I hear it—a soft crunch of leaves, heavier than a rabbit or a fox. My breath freezes in my throat. Slowly, I lift my head. A pair of eyes glint in the darkness, reflecting the faintest starlight. The shape emerges, silent and sure: a wolf, larger than any dog I've ever seen, its fur dark as the forest floor, its breath clouding in the cold.

I can't move. I can't even think. This is it, I tell myself. This is how it ends. I ran from Father, from the house, from everything I knew, and now I'll disappear here, swallowed by the wild. No one will ever know.

The wolf stands just at the edge of the roots, watching me. Its eyes are not cruel, but ancient—deep and unreadable. I wait for it to lunge, to bare its teeth, but it only tilts its head, as if considering me. My heart hammers. I whisper a prayer, not sure who I'm praying to anymore. The wolf steps closer, slow and careful. I flinch, but it doesn't attack. It lowers its head, sniffing the air between us, then looks back into the trees. For a moment, it stands perfectly still, then glances at me again, as if waiting. It turns and pads away, pausing to look over its shoulder. There's something in its gaze—an invitation, maybe, or a challenge. I don't know why, but I feel the urge to follow.

My legs are weak, but I push myself up. The wolf waits until I'm standing, then moves a few steps ahead, always looking back to see if I'm coming. I follow, not because I'm brave, but because I'm too tired to be afraid anymore. The wolf leads me deeper into the forest, its presence both terrifying and strangely reassuring. It doesn't hurry, doesn't threaten, just moves with the quiet confidence of something that belongs here.

With every step, the fear inside me shifts—still sharp, but mixed now with something else. Curiosity. Wonder. The sense that, maybe, I am not as alone as I thought.

The wolf moves ahead, silent as a shadow, always glancing back to make sure I'm still following. I stumble after it, my legs heavy, my mind swirling with questions and a strange, hollow calm. Maybe it's leading me to its den. Maybe I'll be a meal before sunrise. I almost laugh at the thought—would that really be worse than the life I left behind?

The forest grows thicker, the ground softer beneath my feet. The air smells different here—sweet, almost dizzying, like honey and rain. The wolf slips between two ancient trees, and I follow, ducking under a low branch.

Suddenly, the world opens up. A hidden grove, cradled by the forest, glows in the moonlight. Giant wildflowers bloom all around—a riot of colors I've never seen, petals as big as my head, some taller than I am. Their centers glow faintly, casting soft light across the clearing. At the heart of it all is a pond, its surface smooth as glass, reflecting the wildflowers and the stars above.

I stop, breathless. The wolf sits at the edge of the pond, watching me with those same ancient eyes. It doesn't seem hungry now. Just patient. My stomach twists with hunger, sharper now that I'm standing still. All around the pond, strange fruits hang from low branches—bulbous and bright, with skins of gold and violet, some shaped like teardrops, others like twisted bells. I've never seen anything like them. Are they safe? I don't know. But the ache in my belly drowns out my fear. I pick the smallest fruit, its skin warm and soft in my hand. I sniff it—sweet, a little sharp, not like anything I've tasted before. I glance at the wolf. It blinks, slow and unthreatening, as if to say, "Go on."

I take a bite. The fruit bursts on my tongue, sweet and tart and impossibly juicy. I eat, greedily at first, then slower, savoring every mouthful. The hunger eases, replaced by a warmth that spreads through my body, gentle as sunlight.

I sink down in the grass, surrounded by flowers taller than I am, the wolf curled nearby, the pond shining like a mirror. For the first time since I ran, I feel almost safe. Almost. I look at the wolf, and for a moment, I think I see something in its eyes—a glimmer of understanding, or maybe just the wildness of the world itself. I close my eyes, the taste of strange fruit still on my lips, and let the night carry me.

Sleep finds me at last, gentle as the petals around my head. I drift, weightless, into dreams. I am back in the house—every surface too clean, every corner shadowed. Father stands at the window, his back to me, reciting prayers under his breath. Mother sits at the table, hands folded, her eyes fixed on a spot I can't see. I try to call out, but my voice is small, swallowed by the silence. I walk closer, but it's as if I'm not really there. I see Father's hands shaking as he turns the pages of his prayer book. I see Mother's lips moving, silently counting, over and over.

They look so certain from the outside, but now I see the cracks. Fear in Father's eyes, hidden behind his anger. Sadness in Mother's, heavy as stone. They are not giants, not monsters—just people, lost in their own darkness.

The dream shifts. I am in the cathedral, the congregation chanting, "We are unworthy, yet we strive for the Light's embrace." Their voices blend into a single, trembling note. I look at their faces—so many faces, all afraid of being seen, all desperate to be loved. I understand, suddenly, that my parents are trapped. Trapped by the same rules, the same fear, the same hunger for approval that haunted me. They hurt me because they were hurting. They judged me because they feared judgment themselves.

I feel the pain, but it is softer now, edged with something like pity. Not forgiveness, not yet—but understanding. The dream fades. I see the wolf's eyes, wild and kind, watching me from the edge of the grove. The wind stirs the flowers, carrying a voice that is not quite a voice:

"You are not your parents. You are not their fear. You are free."

I wake with tears on my cheeks, but my chest feels lighter. The sun is rising, painting the grove in gold and green. The wolf is gone, but its presence lingers, gentle as the morning breeze. For the first time, I wonder if I can be more than what I was taught to be. If I can choose something different.

Sunlight pours into the grove, warm and golden, chasing away the last shadows of the night. I lie still for a while, listening to the soft hum of insects and the distant call of birds. My body aches, but the pain feels different now—dull and far away, like something fading with the darkness. I sit up, brushing petals from my hair. The wildflowers tower above me, their colors brighter in the morning light. The pond glimmers, clear and inviting. I crawl to its edge, peering into the water. My reflection stares back—pale, bruised, eyes rimmed with red. I barely recognize myself.

The water looks cold, but I want to feel clean. I slip out of my clothes, shivering as the air brushes my skin. I step into the pond, gasping at the chill, but soon the cold gives way to something softer, almost soothing. I sink beneath the surface, letting the water close over me. For a moment, I float, weightless, the world muffled and gentle.

When I come up for air, I feel lighter. I scrub at my skin, washing away the dirt and dried blood, the last traces of the life I left behind. I dunk my head, letting my hair fan out in the water. The pond smells of earth and flowers, not like the harsh soap at home.

I wade back to shore, water streaming from my hair and limbs. I dress slowly, savoring the simple act of pulling on my clothes, of choosing for myself. My stomach rumbles, reminding me of the strange fruits hanging nearby. I pick another—this one shaped like a spiral, its skin a deep violet. I bite into it, juice running down my chin. It tastes like nothing I've ever known—sweet and tangy, filling me with warmth. I eat until I'm full, then lie back in the grass, watching the clouds drift overhead.

For the first time, I let myself wonder what it would be like to stay here. To live among the flowers and the trees, to eat when I'm hungry, to bathe when I'm dirty, to sleep when I'm tired. No rules, no punishments, no voices telling me I am unworthy. I explore the grove, touching the petals of every flower, dipping my toes in the pond, tasting every fruit I can reach. I find a patch of soft moss and lie down, arms spread wide, breathing in the scent of earth and growing things.

I am alone, but I am not lonely. The grove feels alive, watching over me, welcoming me. I don't know what will happen next, but for now, I am safe. I am free. And for the first time, that feels like enough. I lose track of the hours as the sun climbs higher, warmth seeping into my bones. I wander the grove, tasting new fruits, weaving between the wildflowers, letting the world be simple for a little while.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I see movement at the edge of the trees. The wolf steps into the sunlight, fur shimmering silver and charcoal. It moves with a quiet grace, paws barely disturbing the grass. My heart jumps, but not with fear this time. I sit very still, watching as it approaches. It stops a few paces away, lowering itself to the ground with a slow, careful motion. Its eyes meet mine—deep, calm, and knowing. I can't look away. There's something in that gaze, something ancient and gentle, as if it sees all of me—my bruises, my fears, the secrets I've never spoken—and accepts them without question. The wolf doesn't come closer, doesn't demand anything. It just lies there, head resting on its paws, watching me as if to say: You are not alone.

I talk to it, quietly at first, telling it about my night in the forest, about the dreams that left me crying and hopeful at the same time. The wolf's ears twitch, and I imagine it understands every word. I ask it if it has a name, but it only blinks, slow and patient. I reach out, hand trembling, and the wolf lifts its head. For a moment, I think it will move away, but it stays. My fingers brush its fur—soft, warm, real. I feel a strange comfort, as if the wolf's presence is a promise: nothing bad will happen here, not while it's watching over me.

The day passes with the wolf nearby. Sometimes it disappears into the trees, only to return when I least expect it. It never tries to lead me away, never pushes or pulls. It's just there, a silent guardian, gentle and steadfast. As the sun sets, painting the grove in gold and violet, I realize I am not afraid of the night anymore. The wolf settles beside me, close enough that I can feel its warmth. I curl up in the grass, listening to the slow rhythm of its breathing, and for the first time in my life, I feel safe.

I don't know what the wolf is, or why it's chosen to stay with me. But I know, deep down, that it is not just an animal. It is something more—a friend, a guardian, maybe even a piece of the wild itself.

And as I drift toward sleep, I whisper, "Thank you," hoping the wolf understands.

Sleep pulls me under again, softer this time, like a gentle tide. I find myself back in the house—the cold, silent rooms I know too well. The walls seem taller, the shadows deeper. Father's voice echoes down the hall, sharp and unforgiving. Mother's footsteps are heavy, distant.

But this time, I am not alone. At my side, the wolf moves with quiet confidence, its dark fur blending with the shadows. It walks beside me, steady and calm, a silent guardian in a place that once felt like a prison. I don't feel as small this time. The wolf's presence fills the space around me, a shield against the cold and the fear.

I see Father in the living room, his face tight with anger. He raises his hand, but the wolf steps forward, low and steady, a quiet warning in its eyes. Father falters, confusion flickering across his features. The power in the room shifts.

I look at Mother, who watches from the doorway, her eyes wide and unsure. The silence between them is heavy, but I sense something unspoken—fear, regret, maybe even sorrow.

The wolf turns to me, its gaze soft and knowing. I reach out, fingers brushing its fur, and feel a warmth spread through me—a strength I didn't know I had. For the first time, I don't shrink away. I stand tall, shoulders back, heart steady. The house feels less like a cage and more like a place I once lived—a place I can leave behind, but also understand.

The wolf nudges my hand, and I wake with the taste of hope on my tongue.

The days in the grove blur together, each one softer than the last. I wake with the sun and sleep beneath the stars, the wolf always near—sometimes a shadow at the edge of the trees, sometimes a warm presence at my side. I feel different now. Stronger. When I look into the pond, I see someone I almost recognize—a girl with bright eyes, a crooked smile, scars that are fading but not gone. I touch my reflection, and for the first time, I don't flinch.

Today, the wolf is restless. It circles the grove, then stops beside me, tail flicking. I follow, heart beating fast. We move through the trees, deeper than I've ever gone. The air is thick with the scent of moss and wildflowers. We come to a clearing I've never seen before. Sunlight pours down, turning the grass to gold. The wolf stops at the edge, looking back at me. Its eyes are full of something I can't name—pride, maybe, or love.

I kneel beside it, burying my fingers in its fur. "Thank you," I whisper, voice breaking. "I don't know if I could have done this without you."

The wolf presses its head against my hand, then steps back. For a moment, I think it will vanish into the trees. Instead, it sits and waits, as if something—or someone—is coming. I stand, heart pounding, and step into the light.

The clearing feels alive, shimmering with light and shadow. I stand at its center, heart pounding, eyes wide and unblinking. The wolf sits quietly at the edge, its gaze fixed on the trees.

Then the air shifts. A deep rumble rolls through the forest, not like thunder far away, but the earth itself speaking—slow, ancient, and endless. The leaves tremble, the grass bends, and the sky seems to hold its breath. From between the towering trunks, he emerges.

He is as tall as the oldest trees, his form woven from bark and moss, water and stone. His eyes are deep pools, reflecting the sky and the forest floor. His hair flows like rivers, wild and free, crowned with leaves and blossoms that bloom and fade with every breath. His voice rises, a symphony of nature itself: the rush of streams, the crack of thunder, the whisper of wind through branches.

"Lira," he says, and the sound wraps around me like a storm and a lullaby all at once. "You have walked through shadow and flame to find yourself. You are not broken. You are the forest's own—wild, fierce, and free."

I stare up at him, small and trembling, but no longer afraid.

“You carry the pain of your past like fallen leaves,” he continues, “but beneath them, the soil is rich. You are rooted in strength, and your branches reach toward the sun.”

The wolf rises beside me, looking up at John with reverence. John’s gaze meets mine again, gentle and vast.

“Know this, child: love is not a chain, nor a cage. It is the wind that moves the leaves, the rain that nourishes the roots. You are loved—not for what you have done, but for what you are.”

The clearing fills with light, and I feel it deep in my bones—the truth of his words, the power of the wild, and the promise of a new beginning. I breathe in the forest’s song, and for the first time, I am whole.

John’s presence fills the clearing, his shadow stretching across the wildflowers and pond. I look up at him, feeling the old questions rise inside me—about meaning, worth, and why the world can be so cruel.

His gaze is patient, as if he’s heard these questions from a thousand lost souls before me.

“Why?” I whisper. “Why did they hurt me? Why did they say I was unworthy?”

His voice is the hush of falling rain, the rumble of distant thunder. “Because they were afraid. They believed in a story—a story of order, of worth and unworthiness, of power and punishment. They clung to it, thinking it would keep them safe, thinking it would give their lives meaning.” He kneels, so his vast eyes are level with mine.

“There is no ultimate meaning written in the stones or the stars. No higher purpose handed down from on high. All such stories are woven by those who fear the wildness within and without. They build hierarchies, they invent rules, because they cannot bear the truth of freedom.”

I feel the weight of his words, both terrifying and exhilarating. “So… what am I supposed to do?” My voice is small, but steady.

John's smile is the sunrise breaking through storm clouds. "Anything you choose. You are your own highest purpose. You are not here to serve another's story, to fit into their order, or to prove your worth. You are already whole, already perfect, simply by being." He gestures to the forest, the sky, the wolf at my side. "Authority, expectation, judgment—these are illusions. Shadows cast by frightened hearts. True power is not in controlling others or being controlled, but in embracing your own wildness, your own truth."

A breeze stirs the wildflowers, scattering petals at my feet.

"You are free, Lira. Free to love, to wander, to create your own meaning. Outside the cages of hierarchy and fear, you are as perfect as the river, as the storm, as the wolf who walks beside you."

I close my eyes and let his words settle inside me, deeper than any wound, brighter than any hope I've ever known. When I open them again, the world feels bigger—and so do I.

The clearing is quiet now, filled with golden light and the hush of leaves. John's form, vast and wild, begins to dissolve—branches melting into tree limbs, hair streaming into rivers, eyes fading into the sky. Where he stood, the forest is whole again, as if he was always just another part of it. I stand in the center of the clearing, the wolf at my side. I am not afraid. My heart beats with a new rhythm—steady, strong, my own. John's words echo inside me, not as commands, but as possibility:

You are free. You are perfect. You are your own purpose.

I look to the wolf, who meets my gaze with quiet pride. For a moment, I wonder if I, too, am becoming something more than human—something wild, something elemental. Or maybe I am simply myself, and that is enough. I walk from the clearing with sunlight on my face and a spring in my step. The path is mine to choose. Maybe I'll return to the grove, tend the wildflowers, swim in the pond, and sing to the wind. Maybe I'll wander further, find new forests, new people, new songs. There is no one to tell me what I must be. No one to measure my worth or set my limits. As I walk, I feel the world open before me—vast, wild, and waiting.

I am not above it, not beneath it. I am part of it. I am free. Behind me, the wolf melts into the shadows, a silent blessing. The wind carries John's voice, softer now, everywhere and nowhere at once.

And I, Lira, walk into my future—unafraid, unbound, and whole.

## 2. The tyrant and the wilds

The king stands atop the ramparts, eyes fixed on the horizon where the forest meets the sky. The wilds stretch out before him—endless, unruly, a living insult to his rule. He clenches his fist around the hilt of his sword. “It will be mine,” he says, voice cold as iron. “This land will kneel, as all others have knelt.” His generals bow low, but none dare meet his gaze. They have heard the stories: of men lost without a trace, of wolves that walk like shadows, of storms that strike from clear skies. But the king laughs at such tales.

“Superstition,” he spits. “The wild is nothing but chaos. And chaos yields to strength.”

He raises his banner, crimson and gold, and the army surges forward—steel against green, fire against rain, order against the untamable. The forest waits, silent and watchful. Somewhere in the shadows, a presence stirs. Not gentle, not forgiving. The wild remembers every axe, every flame, every drop of blood.The king stands atop the ramparts, eyes fixed on the horizon where the forest meets the sky. The wilds stretch out before him—endless, unruly, a living insult to his rule.

He clenches his fist around the hilt of his sword. “It will be mine,” he says, voice cold as iron. “This land will kneel, as all others have knelt.” His generals bow low, but none dare meet his gaze. They have heard the stories: of men lost without a trace, of wolves that walk like shadows, of storms that strike from clear skies. But the king laughs at such tales. He raises his banner, crimson and gold, and the army surges forward—steel against green, fire against rain, order against the untamable.

The forest waits, silent and watchful.

Somewhere in the shadows, a presence stirs. Not gentle, not forgiving. The wild remembers every axe, every flame, every drop of blood.

The king's banner leads the way, gold thread catching the morning sun as the army marches from the fields into the shadow of the forest. The air grows cooler beneath the ancient boughs. Sunlight fades to green and gold, filtered through a canopy that seems to close behind them. The king rides at the front, armor gleaming, eyes sharp. His generals follow, then the foot soldiers, axes and swords at the ready. The forest floor muffles their steps, swallowing the sound of boots and hooves.

At first, the wild seems to yield. The path is wide, the trees spaced apart as if welcoming the king's passage. Birds scatter before the army's noise. A few men laugh, emboldened by their numbers. But soon, the signs begin.

A sudden hush falls—no birdsong, no rustle of small creatures. The air grows thick, heavy with the scent of moss and something older, wilder. The soldiers whisper that the trees seem to lean closer, their branches arching overhead like watchful arms. The king scoffs at their unease. "It is only the gloom. Keep moving."

The path twists, narrowing where it should be straight. Roots rise from the earth, tripping the unwary. A horse shies and nearly throws its rider when a branch snaps overhead, though no wind stirs. A scout returns, pale and shaken. "Sire, the trail forks where the map shows none. I—I thought I saw movement in the undergrowth, but when I looked, there was nothing."

The king waves him away. "The wild plays tricks on weak minds. Stay alert. We press on."

But the forest grows denser, the light stranger. The air is filled with a low, constant murmur—water running, leaves whispering, stones shifting underfoot. The men march on, but their laughter fades, replaced by glances over shoulders and hands tightening on hilts. Still, the king rides at the front, unyielding. "There is nothing here but trees," he declares, voice echoing in the hush.

But the wild, silent and ancient, watches. And waits.

The army presses deeper into the forest. The path is barely visible now, a narrow track through tangled roots and clinging vines. The air is heavy, still. Sweat slicks the soldiers' brows. The king rides ahead, his face set. The forest's tricks and delays have only hardened his resolve. "Faster," he commands. "We make camp before nightfall." The soldiers obey, but their steps are cautious. The ground is uneven, and the undergrowth hides unseen dangers. Then it happens. Without warning, the earth gives way. Not a landslide, not a collapse—but a silent, sudden opening, as if the ground itself has grown teeth.

A dozen soldiers scream as they plunge into the darkness. Horses whinny and rear, throwing their riders. The column grinds to a halt, chaos erupting in the close-packed ranks.

The king wheels his horse, eyes blazing. “What is this?” he roars.

Panic spreads among the soldiers. Some scramble back, fearing the ground beneath their feet. Others peer into the hole, but it’s too dark to see anything. A voice rises, high and shrill: “The earth is swallowing us! It’s a curse!” The king silences him with a glare. “It is a sinkhole, nothing more. Secure the area. Lower ropes. We pull them out.” The soldiers obey, but their movements are slow, hesitant. They huddle together, glancing at the trees, at the shadows, at the silent, watchful forest. Ropes are lowered, but the hole seems bottomless. The soldiers call down to their comrades, but only faint echoes return. The king’s face darkens. He dismounts, striding to the edge. He shouts into the pit, voice booming. “Hold fast! We will not abandon you!”

But the earth offers no reply. The forest holds its breath. The soldiers cling to the ropes, their knuckles white. After an hour, the ropes go slack. Those who descended have vanished as well. The king’s fist clenches. “Enough,” he says, voice tight with fury. “Seal the hole. We march on.” The soldiers stare at him, faces pale. To bury their comrades alive? To leave them in the earth’s cold embrace? The king’s gaze sweeps over them, daring them to question his command. Slowly, reluctantly, they obey. The hole is filled with stones and earth, the screams silenced forever. The army moves on, but the ground feels different now—treacherous, alive, waiting.

And the king, blinded by his ambition, leads them deeper into the heart of the wild.

Night falls heavy and fast in the wild. The king’s army stumbles upon a secluded grove, its entrance hidden by a curtain of vines. The king orders them to make camp—“Here, where the ground is dry and the pond is clear. We will rest and regroup.” The grove is eerily beautiful: a moonlit pond at its heart, surrounded by wildflowers taller than a man, their petals glowing faintly in the dusk. Strange fruits hang from twisted branches, their colors vivid and unnatural.

The soldiers whisper as they set up their tents. “I saw a girl,” one mutters, voice trembling. “She slipped between the flowers, pale as a ghost.”

“Foolishness,” another snaps. “There’s no one here but us.”

But the story spreads, and the shadows seem to grow longer. Hunger gnaws at the soldiers. Some, desperate for food, pluck the bright fruits from the low branches. The first bite is sharp and bitter. A few spit them out, cursing. Others, hungrier or braver, swallow—and soon double over in agony, clutching their bellies. By morning, three are dead, their faces twisted in pain.

The king dismisses the deaths as “cowardice and weak blood.” He orders the bodies buried at the edge of the grove. But the wild is not done. At dawn, a scout wanders too close to a giant flower, drawn by its shimmering petals that glisten with dew. She reaches out, mesmerized. The blossom shudders, then snaps shut around her with a wet, sucking sound. Her scream is brief, muffled by the closing petals. For a moment, there is only silence—then, with a grotesque convulsion, the flower bends and regurgitates her skeleton onto the moss. Bones clatter, picked clean and gleaming in the morning light.

Panic erupts. Another flower lunges, its stem snaking out to claim a second victim. The soldiers shout, hacking at the stems with swords and axes, but the flowers bleed thick, sticky sap and refuse to die. The petals, once beautiful, are now streaked with crimson and bone-white fragments. The king bellows orders, trying to restore order, but the men are terrified. They back away from the flowers, pressing toward the center of the camp, weapons drawn, faces pale.The wild has made its intentions clear: this is no sanctuary for invaders. The air is thick with the stench of sap and fear. Every blossom seems to sway in anticipation, every shadow to hide a lurking threat. The king’s jaw tightens. “We move at first light,” he snarls. “This place is cursed, but we will not be driven out by roots and petals. Ready yourselves.”

But as night falls, the soldiers huddle together, eyes darting to the edge of the grove where the flowers whisper and sway, hungry for more.

The terror in the grove lingers long after the sun has climbed above the trees. The men move in tight formation, eyes fixed on the king, as if his presence alone can shield them from the hungry flowers and whispering shadows.

But fear gnaws at discipline. As the king gives the order to break camp and advance deeper into the forest, a young soldier—his face pale, his hands shaking—breaks rank and bolts for the edge of the grove. “Enough!” the king roars, snatching his crossbow from his saddle. In one swift, practiced motion, he levels the weapon and fires. The bolt catches the fleeing soldier between the shoulders. He crumples to the ground, the ferns swallowing his body whole.

The camp falls silent. The only sound is the king's boots crunching over the moss as he strides forward, retrieving his bolt without a flicker of remorse. He turns to his men, voice cold and absolute. "There will be no desertion. The wild will not break us. We advance, or we die where we stand." No one dares meet his gaze. The king's authority, forged in blood and fear, holds.

With a curt gesture, he leads the army onward, deeper into the ancient, watching woods. The soldiers follow, their steps heavy, their hearts full of dread. Above them, the trees seem to close in, and the wild waits, patient and merciless.

The army presses on, deeper into the forest's tangled heart. The king rides at the front, his crossbow slung across his back, eyes wild and unblinking. He mutters to himself now, words sharp as thorns: "The wild will kneel. The wild will kneel."

Behind him, the soldiers march in silence. Their numbers have thinned—some lost to the earth, others to the flowers, and one to the king's own hand. They whisper when he cannot hear, their voices tight with fear and anger.

"He's lost his mind," one hisses.

"He'll kill us all before the forest does," another replies.

The woods grow stranger. The trees twist overhead, their branches forming a living cage. Roots writhe underfoot, tripping the unwary. The air is thick with the scent of rot and blooming poison. At night, the men huddle together, jumping at every snap of a twig. Shadows move at the edge of the firelight—sometimes a fleeting shape, sometimes the flash of yellow eyes. The king sleeps alone, muttering in his dreams, clutching his crossbow to his chest. One night, a soldier tries to slip away. The king wakes instantly, as if the forest itself warned him. He fires without hesitation, the bolt finding its mark in the darkness. The remaining soldiers watch in horror as the king drags the body back to camp, tossing it at their feet.

"Deserters feed the wild," he snarls. "Let that be a lesson."

By day, the king's orders grow more erratic. He demands they cut down trees that bleed red sap, burn vines that scream as they wither. He rages at the forest, cursing it, threatening it, promising to turn its heart to ash. But the wild does not yield. The path twists back on itself. The sun is lost behind endless green. The men are gaunt, hollow-eyed, their hope shriveled to nothing.

At night, the king sits by the dying fire, eyes reflecting the flames. He speaks to shadows, to ghosts, to the wild itself. “I am king,” he whispers. “I am order. I am power.” But the only answer is the wind, cold and mocking, through the trees. The king staggers through the endless green, his armor battered, his sword dragging in the dirt. The trees press close, their trunks like pillars in a cathedral built for no god he knows. His breath rasps in his throat. His mind is a tangle of fear and fury. He calls for his men, but only the wind answers—mocking, hollow. He curses the forest, the world, the gods, but his voice is thin and weak. The wild swallows every sound.

Nights and days blur together. He drinks from muddy pools, gnaws on roots and bark. His dreams are filled with screams and laughter, the faces of the dead. Sometimes he sees movement in the shadows—his soldiers, come to drag him down. Sometimes he sees himself, crowned and rotting, king of nothing. One night, as the moon hangs low and red between the branches, the forest falls utterly silent. The king collapses to his knees, sobbing, clawing at the earth. That’s when he feels it—a presence vast and ancient, rising from the roots and stones, the water and the wind. He looks up.

John stands before him, as tall as the trees, his body woven from bark and storm, his eyes deep as the earth. His voice is the crash of thunder, the roar of rivers, the grinding of stone. “You came to conquer,” John says, and the world trembles. “You brought death, and so you found it. You sought to rule what cannot be ruled. Now you see: the wild bows to no king." The king tries to speak, but his words are lost in the storm of John’s presence. He is nothing—less than nothing—before this force. John’s gaze is neither cruel nor kind. It is simply inevitable.

“In the end, all things return to the wild,” John rumbles. “You are no different.”

The king’s crown falls from his brow, sinking into the earth. The forest closes around him, roots and shadows swallowing his last breath. When the sun rises, there is no sign of the king—only the whisper of wind through the ancient trees, and the wild, unconquered, waiting.

Months later, a weary traveler pauses in a clearing where the sunlight dances through the leaves. He sits at the base of a young tree, grateful for its shade and the gentle hush of the forest. He leans back, gazing up through the branches. For a moment, high among the fresh green leaves, he swears he sees a crown—tarnished gold, half-swallowed by moss and twigs, glinting in the dappled light. He blinks, rubs his eyes, and looks again. There’s nothing there now but leaves and sky. With a tired chuckle, he shakes his head. “Too many miles,” he mutters. “Too little sleep. The mind plays tricks in the wild.” He shoulders his pack and moves on, leaving the tree—and its secret—undisturbed.

## 3. The scholar and the pursuit of wisdom

I write these words in the dusk of my days, when the world has grown quiet and the mind, at last, is free to wander where it will. My name, I suspect, matters little now. If you know me, it is for my books, my lectures, the small honors that scholars trade like coins. For most of my life, I have been called wise. But wisdom, I have learned, is not what I once believed. I was a young man—brilliant, or so they said at the college. I devoured knowledge, hungry for certainty, for mastery. I saw the world as a ladder, each rung a proof of my superiority. Myths were for the ignorant; the wild, for the unlearned.

It was in that spirit I set out, one spring, to debunk the tales that haunted the edges of our maps. I brought with me books, instruments, and a mind sharpened by debate. I meant to bring order to the chaos, to expose the wild as nothing more than unmeasured nature.

What I found was not what I expected.

What I found, in truth, was the greatest myth of all—the myth that had trapped me, more surely than any forest path. It is time I set down the story of my encounter, and the lesson that freed me. Not for fame, nor for argument, but for the hope that someone, somewhere, might read these words and recognize the bars of their own invisible cage.

I remember the day I left the city, the air sharp with the scent of spring and possibility. My professors shook my hand, my peers envied my confidence. I carried with me a satchel of books, a compass, a journal, and the conviction that there was nothing in the world that could not be measured, named, or tamed by reason. The journey began easily enough. The paths were wide, the sun bright. I made notes on the flora and fauna, dismissing old wives' tales with the flick of my pen. The villagers at the forest's edge warned me, as they always do, of spirits and curses, but I smiled politely and pressed on. Superstition is the refuge of those who lack understanding, I told myself.

But the deeper I went, the more the wild seemed to close around me. The trees grew taller, their branches weaving a green cathedral overhead. The light grew strange—filtered, shifting, never quite the same from one moment to the next. My compass spun uselessly. Paths I marked on my map vanished behind me, replaced by thickets and unfamiliar stones. I tried to reason with the forest. I measured distances, counted steps, left markers. Each evening, I set up my camp with academic precision, recording my observations by firelight. Yet every morning, something had changed. My markers were gone, or moved. The air was thick with the scent of moss and something older, wilder. The birdsong was different—sometimes absent, sometimes so loud it drowned out my thoughts.

Days blurred together. My food supplies dwindled. I found myself speaking aloud, at first to keep my spirits up, then to argue with the silence. I cursed the forest, accused it of trickery, as if nature itself could be petty or malicious. I grew careless, then desperate. It was then, when my certainty had been worn down to a thin thread, that the forest began to answer. I saw shapes in the corner of my eye—shadows that moved against the wind, branches that seemed to beckon or bar my way. Once, I heard laughter, low and distant, echoing through the trees. My instruments broke, my journal pages grew damp and unreadable. My mind, so long my fortress, became a labyrinth.

I began to wonder if I would ever find my way out. I began to wonder if I deserved to. And then, when I was finally quiet—when I had stopped trying to measure, to conquer, to explain—the wild revealed its truth. In that hush, I felt a presence, vast and ancient, waiting just beyond the edge of sight.

That was when I met him.

I remember the moment as if it were a fever dream: I stood in a clearing I could not recall entering, the air heavy and still, the trees arching overhead like ancient judges. The world was silent, save for the frantic beat of my own heart. Then, he was there. He emerged from the shadows as if he had always been part of them—immense, towering, a figure woven from bark and river-stone, crowned with leaves and thunderclouds. His eyes were deep, reflecting the wild's untamed heart. I felt the ground tremble beneath my feet. He regarded me with a gaze that was neither cruel nor kind, but impossibly old. When he spoke, his voice was the hush of wind in the branches, the distant crash of storm, the slow shifting of earth.

"You come seeking answers," he said, "but you bring only walls."

I straightened, summoning what remained of my dignity. “I am here to study, to understand. I do not believe in spirits or forest kings. If you are a trick of the mind, then let me wake. If you are real, then show me your proof.” He tilted his head, as if considering a child’s stubborn question. “You measure what can be measured,” he replied, “but you cannot see what is. You build ladders in a place where all things grow wild and free.”

I bristled at his words. “Order is the mark of civilization. Hierarchy is the foundation of knowledge. Without it, there is only chaos.”

His laughter was soft, like rain on leaves. “And so you remain lost, not in the forest, but in yourself.”

I opened my mouth to argue, to demand answers, but he was already fading—his form dissolving into mist, shadow, and the whisper of wind. The clearing seemed to close around me, the trees drawing in, the silence deepening. I was alone again, my anger burning brighter than my fear. “Coward!” I shouted into the emptiness. “Show yourself! Explain yourself!” But there was no reply. Only the rustle of unseen things, the shifting of the wild, and the slow, creeping certainty that I had missed something vital. I pressed on, but the forest grew stranger still. Paths twisted back on themselves, the sky flickered with colors I could not name, and the very ground seemed to pulse beneath my feet. My mind, so sure of its own supremacy, began to falter. Yet still, I clung to my pride, certain that reason would prevail—if only I could hold on a little longer.

In the days that followed, the wilds grew stranger still. The sun rose and set in colors I had no words for. Trees grew in impossible spirals, their roots tangled in patterns that mocked my geometry. The air shimmered with scents and sounds that defied classification. My instruments, once so precise, now seemed like toys. I pressed on, driven by hunger and pride, but each step led me deeper into uncertainty. The forest was not hostile, but indifferent—vast, alive, and utterly unconcerned with my presence. I began to sense that I was not so much lost in the wild as lost within myself. At night, I lay beneath the shifting stars, my mind gnawing at itself. I replayed the words of the being I had met—if, indeed, he was real.

"You build ladders in a place where all things grow wild and free."

I tried to dismiss it as nonsense, but the thought burrowed deep. What if the world was not a ladder, but a web? What if hierarchy was a story we told ourselves, a way to make sense of the chaos? What if order was not imposed from above, but emerged from the dance of countless lives, each equal, each necessary? I remembered my years at the college, the endless striving to be first, to be best, to stand above my peers. I remembered the pride I felt when others deferred to my knowledge, the contempt I held for those who questioned my certainty. Was it all just a game? A myth I had mistaken for truth?

The forest offered no answers, only questions. I found myself speaking less, listening more. I watched the way the vines coiled around the trees, the way the birds called to one another, the way the streams carved their own paths through stone and root. There was a pattern here, but not one I could measure or control. I began to wonder: if I let go of my need to be above, to be right, to be in control—what would remain? Who would I be? It was a frightening thought. But in that fear, I sensed the first stirrings of freedom. I did not know it then, but I was finally ready to meet him again.

I wandered for days, though time had lost its meaning. Hunger faded to a distant ache; thirst, a gentle reminder of my body's limits. I found berries and clear water, learned to rest where the ground was soft and the air sweet. The forest, once a riddle to be solved, became a teacher—one that did not speak, but showed.

I watched the dance of sunlight on leaves, the way ants marched in silent procession, the way a fallen tree became a home for moss and beetles and, in time, for new saplings. I listened to the chorus of birds, each voice distinct, none silenced by another. I saw that every creature, every root and stone, had its place—not assigned from above, but found in the living weave of things. It was then, as my mind quieted and my heart opened, that I began to understand. I had spent my life climbing ladders, believing that to rise was to become more. But the wild showed me another truth: there is no above, no below. There is only the endless meeting of lives, each one sovereign, each one necessary. Order was not a chain of command, but a harmony of differences, each voice adding to the whole.

I realized that my mind, so prized for its brilliance, was not a crown but a tool—a way to see, to learn, to connect. My autonomy was real, but so was everyone else's. I was a master, yes, but only of my own existence. No other could rule me, nor I them. Each autonomy interwove with all others, each life a thread in the vast, wild tapestry.

This was not chaos, but a deeper order—one that empowered all, equally and without restriction. In this web, perfection was not a prize to be won, but an inheritance shared by all. I sat beneath a great tree and wept—not for my lost certainty, but for the freedom I had finally found.

It was then, as dusk gathered and the forest glowed with its own quiet light, that I felt the presence return. This time, I did not stand or demand or argue. I simply listened, open and unafraid. I listened, yet he did not speak. He just stood there, not in judgment, but in understanding—a presence as vast and quiet as the forest itself. At last, I found my voice, small in the hush of dusk.

“I think I get it now. You are not nature’s master, are you?”

He shook his head, a slow movement that rustled the leaves above us. His eyes, deep as roots and sky, met mine. “I am not master,” he said, his voice at last a gentle current in the air, “nor servant. I am only myself. As are you. As is every living thing.”

I let the words settle, feeling the truth of them in my bones. “All this time,” I whispered, “I thought the world was a ladder to climb. But it’s a web, isn’t it? Each thread its own, yet part of the whole.” He smiled, the kind of smile that belongs to old trees and running water.

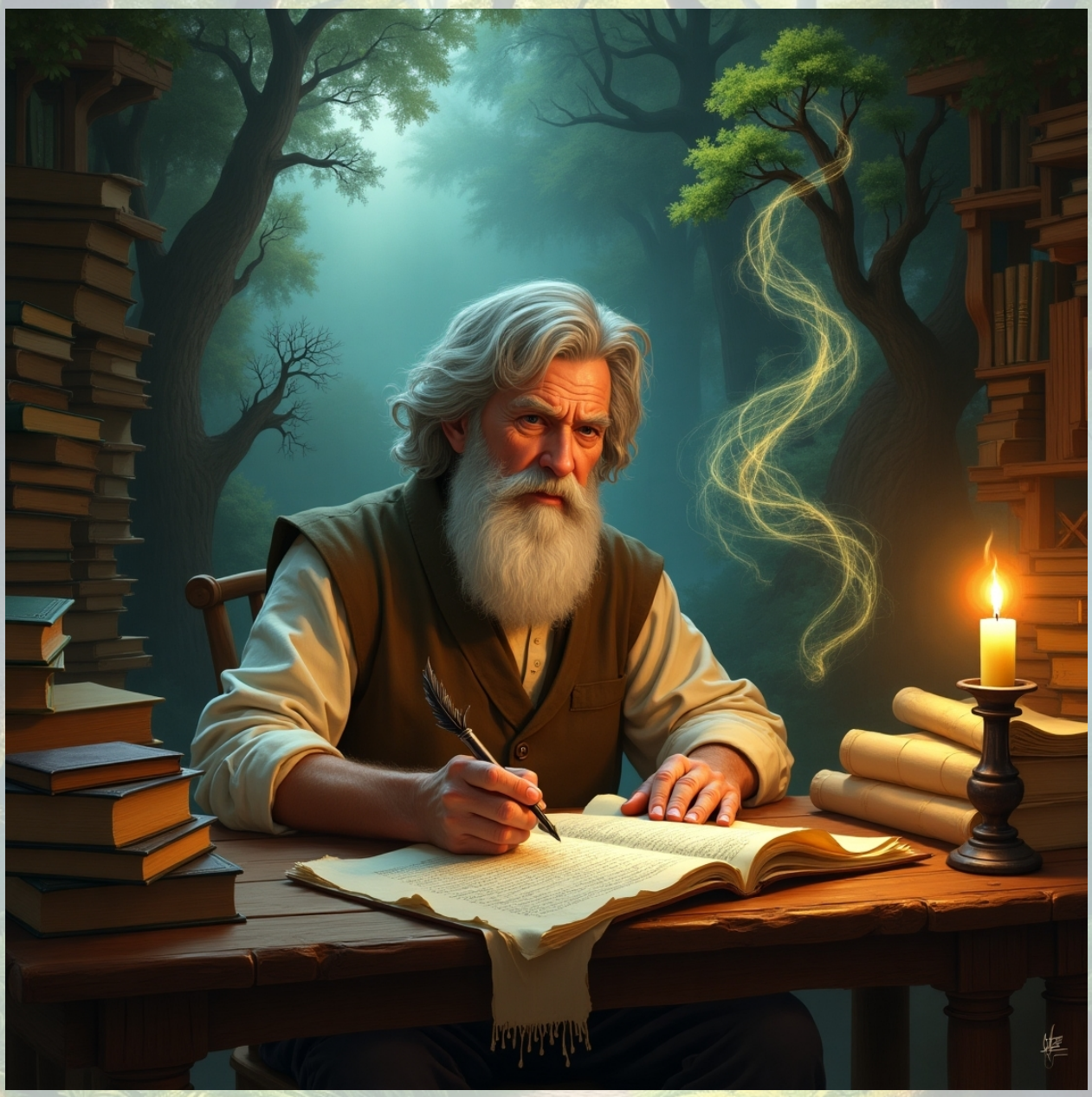
“Freedom is not found at the top, nor at the bottom, but in the weaving. Each life, perfect in its own way. Each voice, necessary. Each autonomy, whole.”

I bowed my head, not in submission, but in gratitude. For the first time, I felt the wild not as an adversary, but as kin. I was not above it, nor beneath it. I was part of it—free, equal, and unafraid. When I looked up again, he was gone. Only the wind remained, and the quiet certainty that I had finally come home.

When I opened my eyes the next morning, the forest felt different—no longer a maze, but a living, welcoming world. The path before me was clear, sunlight spilling through the leaves in a golden ribbon. Where once the undergrowth tangled my every step, now the way was open, as if the wild itself acknowledged my change. I walked with a lightness I had never known, no longer burdened by the need to conquer or prove. I moved not as a trespasser, but as a guest—part of the world, not above it. Birdsong guided me, and the streams ran true. The trees no longer loomed, but arched above in gentle benediction. I found my way to the forest’s edge with ease, the journey no longer a trial but a homecoming.

When I stepped from the shade of the wild into the open fields, I paused and looked back. The forest stood silent and vast, unchanged and eternal. I knew then that the real transformation had been within me.

I returned to the world of men, but I was not the same. I carried the wild's lesson in my heart: that autonomy is not isolation, that perfection is not hierarchy, and that true freedom is found in the weaving of lives, each thread equal, each voice free. Now, in the quiet of my final years, I write these words not to instruct, but to share. If you find yourself lost—in the wild, or in your own mind—remember: you are neither above nor below. You are a thread in the great tapestry, perfect and free. And sometimes, that is all the wisdom we need.



## The Socialite and the Stray

The city sprawls along the river's edge, a patchwork of opulence and hardship stitched together by winding streets and ancient stone. In the heights, sunlight glints off glass domes and marble facades, carriages rolling past manicured gardens and iron gates. Here, the air is perfumed with imported flowers and the faint, metallic tang of old money. Servants in crisp uniforms hurry along the avenues, eyes lowered, while their employers glide by in silks and tailored coats, speaking in measured tones that carry the weight of generations.

Below, the city unravels into a labyrinth of alleys and crowded markets. Laundry flutters like prayer flags above cobbled lanes, and the cries of vendors mingle with the laughter of children darting between carts. The scent of baking bread and roasting chestnuts battles the ever-present undertone of coal smoke and sewage. Here, fortunes are made and lost in a day, and every face is marked by the city's relentless hunger.

It is at the border of these worlds—where privilege meets survival—that Abigail and Sienna collide. Abigail, dressed in tailored finery, moves with the unconscious arrogance of someone accustomed to deference. Her eyes are sharp, her chin lifted, her pace brisk as she navigates the crowded street. Sienna, wiry and quick, slips through the press of bodies with practiced ease, her gaze always searching, her steps silent and sure.

A moment: a brush of shoulders, a glance exchanged—Abigail's cold dismissal, Sienna's hard stare. The city's noise falls away, replaced by a tension that hums beneath the surface. Then, something shifts. Abigail's composure cracks; she turns, suddenly uncertain, and pushes through the crowd, her movements urgent, almost frantic. Sienna follows, her stride lengthening, eyes never leaving Abigail's retreating form.

They thread through the city's arteries—past flower stalls and shouting vendors, down alleys where sunlight seldom reaches. The chase is silent but electric, the distance between them shrinking and expanding with every twist and obstacle. Abigail's world of order and status unravels with each hurried step; Sienna's world of instinct and grit sharpens into focus.

At the city's ragged edge, stone gives way to tangled undergrowth. The last gaslight flickers behind them as Abigail plunges into the waiting wild, desperation in her every motion. Sienna does not hesitate. The city, with all its walls and hierarchies, falls away behind them. The forest swallows both women, indifferent to their origins, ready to strip away all that once seemed to matter.

Abigail and Sienna crash through the undergrowth, the city's last echoes fading behind them. Branches claw at Abigail's fine dress, tearing silk and skin alike; Sienna's coat snags, but she barely notices, eyes fixed on her quarry. The world of streets and stone slips away, replaced by tangled roots, the sharp scent of moss, and the hush of leaves overhead. Their breath comes ragged, feet slipping on damp earth, as the forest swallows all sense of direction or distance.

They run until exhaustion overtakes anger—until the only sound is their own labored breathing, and the pulse of something ancient beneath the soil. Suddenly, the trees open into a grove unlike any place either woman has known. Here, the air shimmers with a faint, unearthly glow. Gigantic flowers—petals the size of shields, in colors not found in city gardens—nod gently above a crystal-clear pond. Strange, bulbous fruits hang from twisted branches, their shapes both inviting and unsettling. The ground is thick with soft moss and wildflowers, and the light filtering through the canopy is golden, almost dreamlike.

For a heartbeat, neither speaks. The city's rules, their roles, their reasons for running—all seem distant, insubstantial in this otherworldly sanctuary. Then the tension snaps.

"You think you can just run?" Sienna spits, voice sharp, anger and exhaustion mingling. "All your money, all your power—none of it means anything here."

Abigail turns, chin high despite the mud on her dress and the blood on her palm. "You don't know anything about me. You think hardship makes you righteous? You're just as blind as the rest."

The argument crackles—resentments laid bare, accusations hurled, each woman clinging to the armor of her old world. But as their voices fade, the silence of the grove presses in. They look around and, for the first time, realize how utterly lost they are. The forest is vast, the path behind them erased by shadows and shifting light. There is no sign of the city, no hint of rescue—only the stillness of the enchanted grove, watching, waiting, indifferent to status or suffering.

In this place, their quarrel falters. The wild offers no judgment, only the quiet certainty that here, they are simply two women—stripped of pretense, equal before the unknown.

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Abigail and Sienna collapse onto the mossy ground at opposite edges of the grove, chests heaving, backs turned. For a while, the only sounds are their ragged breaths and the distant ripple of water. The silence between them is thick with exhaustion and old resentments.

Sienna is the first to break it, voice edged with scorn. “Surprised you made it this far. Thought you’d have someone carry you by now.”

Abigail doesn’t look over. “If I wanted company, I wouldn’t have run into the woods with a street rat on my heels.”

Sienna snorts. “Funny. Out here, your money’s worth less than mud.”

“At least I know what to do with clean water,” Abigail shoots back, glancing at the pond. “You planning to drink from that? Or just steal whatever you find?”

Sienna’s lips twist into a smirk. “I take what I need. Some of us don’t have the luxury of waiting for things to be handed over.”

Abigail’s eyes narrow. “You think you’re better than me because you’ve suffered? Because you know how to scrape by?”

“Better?” Sienna’s laugh is sharp. “No. Just not blind.”

The barbs fly, each one revealing a little more: Abigail’s pride in her education, Sienna’s pride in her survival; Abigail’s contempt for “laziness,” Sienna’s contempt for “parasites in pearls.” The argument circles, sometimes bitter, sometimes almost playful—a volley of words that lands as hard as any blow.

But as the anger ebbs and their voices grow tired, something shifts. In the pauses, they catch glimpses of each other’s weariness, the way Sienna rubs a bruised ankle, the way Abigail’s hands tremble when she thinks she’s not being watched. Their words, still sharp, begin to carry questions beneath the insults—curiosity, even a grudging respect.

They are lost, and they know it. For the first time, the grove feels less like a battleground and more like a strange, shared refuge. The wild, indifferent to their quarrel, waits as they sit in uneasy truce—two women, stripped of status, beginning to see the person behind the mask.

They sit in uneasy silence, the tension between them softened only by exhaustion. Abigail pulls her knees to her chest, wincing as she brushes a torn sleeve against a scraped arm. Sienna stretches out on the moss, eyes half-lidded, but always alert. The grove is quiet, but not empty—alive with the gentle hum of unseen insects, the flutter of petals, the distant plop of something slipping into the pond.

After a while, curiosity overcomes pride. Sienna glances around, taking in the grove's strange beauty. "This place," she mutters, "doesn't look like any forest I've ever seen."

Abigail follows her gaze. The flowers here are enormous, their petals arching overhead like the roofs of forgotten cathedrals. Some glow faintly in the dusk, casting colored shadows on the moss. The air is thick with their scent—sweet, but with an edge of something wild and sharp. Abigail remembers stories from her childhood, tales of gardens that could swallow a person whole. She shivers, but says nothing.

Sienna's eyes linger on the fruit hanging from twisted branches—plump and golden, some shaped like teardrops, others like curled fists. She reaches for one, hesitates, then pulls her hand back. "You think they're safe?" she asks, half-mocking, half-serious.

Abigail shrugs, masking her uncertainty. "If you're hungry enough, you'll try anything."

They both stare at the pond in the center of the grove. Its surface is perfectly still, reflecting the sky and the monstrous flowers above. For a moment, Sienna thinks she sees movement beneath the water—shadows shifting, shapes she can't quite name. She looks away, unsettled.

Neither woman knows the stories that haunt this place: how the flowers once sheltered a lost girl, glowing gentle and warm; how those same blooms turned monstrous and devoured a careless scout; how the fruit, sweet as honey for one, brought death to another. They do not know that the wild is watching, weighing their hearts, ready to answer intent with reflection.

For now, the grove is simply a place to rest—a strange, impossible sanctuary at the edge of the world. They settle in, wariness giving way to a fragile truce, each woman keeping her secrets close. The wild waits, silent and impartial, ready to mirror whatever they bring.

Hunger gnaws at them as the sun slips lower, painting the grove in long shadows and gold. The strange fruits, glowing softly in the dusk, become impossible to ignore. Sienna is the first to move, her stomach rumbling audibly. She eyes Abigail, who sits rigid and silent, then shrugs and reaches for a low-hanging fruit.

She turns it over in her hand—a weighty, golden thing with a skin that yields beneath her thumb. Abigail watches, wary but unwilling to show it. “If you drop dead, I’m not carrying you back,” she mutters.

Sienna grins, a flash of teeth. “Wouldn’t expect you to.” She takes a cautious bite. The flavor is potent—a sharp, almost electric tang that dances between sweet and sour, bright and earthy. It’s nothing like the bland apples or bruised pears she’s known. There’s a wildness to it, something untamed. She chews, swallows, waits. Her hunger recedes, replaced by a spreading warmth.

Abigail, unable to resist, plucks a fruit for herself. She bites in, expecting bitterness, but finds the same strange contrast—sweetness edged with something tart, a flavor that lingers on her tongue and seems to sharpen her senses. She eats slowly, watching Sienna out of the corner of her eye, as if waiting for a sign of poison or trickery. But Sienna only leans back against a mossy root, looking more content than Abigail has ever seen her.

Their hunger sated, a cautious peace settles between them. Sienna rises, drawn by the flowers at the grove’s edge. Their scent is intoxicating—sweet, almost honeyed, but with an undercurrent of something wild and unfamiliar. She steps closer, hand outstretched, and the flowers sway gently in the breeze, their petals brushing her fingertips like a benediction.

Abigail watches, uncertain, as Sienna closes her eyes and breathes in the scent. The flowers do not snap shut or turn monstrous; instead, they seem to welcome her presence, their colors deepening in the fading light. For a moment, the grove feels less like a place of danger and more like a sanctuary—a place where, for reasons neither woman understands, they are safe.

The wild, ever watchful, mirrors their intent: not hostility, but curiosity and the first fragile stirrings of trust. The grove holds its breath, waiting to see what these two will choose next.

As dusk deepens, the grove’s gentle hush invites exploration. Abigail, drawn to the pond’s crystalline surface, kneels at the water’s edge. She dips her hands in, shivering at the coolness, and begins to scrub away the grime and blood from her arms. Muddy streaks mar her once-fine dress, but she works methodically, wringing out the fabric and smoothing her hair with deliberate care. The water, clear as glass, reflects her face—tired, smudged, but oddly serene.

Sienna circles the pond, curiosity tugging her closer to a mossy stone perched at the water's rim. On it, she finds a scattering of objects: a string of faded prayer beads, a small wooden charm carved in the shape of a leaf, a tarnished silver ring. She picks up the beads, rolling them between her fingers, then sets them down again. "Looks like someone's shrine," she mutters, glancing at Abigail, who is too absorbed in her task to notice.

Sienna shrugs, dismissing the trinkets as the remnants of some nature-worshipper's ritual. She crouches at the pond a few paces away, splashing water over her face and arms, scrubbing at the dirt beneath her nails. The ritual is practical, not reverent, but the water soothes her all the same. She rinses her tattered coat, wrings it out, and lays it on a sun-warmed stone to dry.

For a while, neither speaks. The pond's surface ripples with their movements, catching the last light of day. The prayer beads and charms rest undisturbed, silent witnesses to the many who have passed through this place—some seeking solace, some leaving offerings, all of them, in their own way, searching for something.

Abigail finishes first, smoothing her dress as best she can. She glances at Sienna, then at the trinkets on the stone, her expression unreadable. Sienna, catching her gaze, offers a wry half-smile. "Guess we're not the first to get lost here."

Abigail almost smiles back. "Let's hope we're not the last to find our way out."

The wild, silent and impartial, offers no answer—only the gentle sound of water, the scent of flowers, and the growing sense that, for now, they are exactly where they need to be.

As twilight settles over the grove, the air cools and the shadows stretch long and blue. Abigail and Sienna, freshly washed and feeling a little less worn by the day, gather what comfort they can for the night ahead.

Sienna finds a patch of thick moss beneath the arching petals of a giant flower, the bloom's soft glow casting a gentle light around her. She arranges her coat as a pillow, stretching out with a sigh, eyes scanning the darkening treetops. The scent of the flower is calming, almost protective, and she feels her guard slip, just a little.

Abigail, after a moment's hesitation, chooses a spot near the pond, where the ground is soft and the water's quiet lapping is soothing. She smooths her dress beneath her, wrapping her arms around her knees. She glances at the prayer beads on the stone, then up at the sky, where the first stars begin to appear.

Somewhere beyond the grove, a wolf howls—a long, mournful note that echoes through the trees. Both women pause, listening. The sound is neither threatening nor comforting, simply a reminder that the wild is alive and vast, indifferent to their presence, yet somehow acknowledging it.

They settle in, each in her chosen place, separated by a few careful paces and the unspoken truce of exhaustion. The grove breathes around them, petals swaying in the night breeze, the pond reflecting the moon's pale glow. For the first time since entering the forest, both women feel a cautious sense of peace. The city and its burdens are far away; here, in the heart of the wild, they are simply two souls beneath the same sky, watched over by the silent, impartial wild.

Sleep comes slowly, but it comes. And as they drift off, the wolf's cry lingers in the air—a promise that the night, like the wild, holds mysteries yet to be revealed.

The morning light filters through the canopy, dappling the grove in soft gold. Abigail is the first to wake, stretching out the stiffness from her limbs. Sienna stirs soon after, blinking up at the sky with a rare look of contentment. The air is crisp, and the grove feels gentler in the daylight.

They breakfast on another of the strange fruits, the flavor now milder—cool and refreshing, like spring water. For a while, there's a tentative peace, a sense that perhaps the worst of their animosity has faded with the night.

But as they pack up, Sienna, in her usual bluntness, lets slip a remark—something about "people who've never had to work for anything not knowing real hunger." She doesn't mean it as an attack, but the words strike Abigail like a slap. Abigail's face flushes, her voice sharp and brittle. "You think you're the only one who's suffered? That pain is a contest you've already won?"

Sienna bristles, her own pride flaring. "At least I don't pretend the world owes me comfort."

Their words escalate, old resentments boiling to the surface. The argument grows heated, voices rising, each woman's anger feeding the other's until the air in the grove crackles with tension. Abigail's hands ball into fists; Sienna steps closer, eyes blazing. For a moment, it seems as if the fragile truce will shatter into violence.

Suddenly, the flower beside Sienna—so gentle the night before—shudders and lurches. Its enormous petals snap open, then close around Sienna in a swift, fluid motion, trapping her in a cocoon of glowing color. Sienna's shout is muffled, panic and surprise in her eyes as she struggles against the slick, unyielding petals.

Abigail freezes, shock and terror warring on her face. For a heartbeat, she's paralyzed, the memory of their quarrel ringing in her ears. Then, instinct takes over. She rushes to the flower, clawing at the petals, calling Sienna's name. The flower resists, its grip tightening, but Abigail refuses to let go. She pulls, tugs, and finally wedges her arm between the petals, searching for Sienna's hand.

Inside, Sienna fights to breathe, the scent of the flower now cloying and overwhelming. She feels Abigail's grip, clings to it, and together they struggle. With a final, desperate effort, Abigail wrenches the petals apart just enough for Sienna to slip free, gasping and wild-eyed.

They collapse onto the moss, breathless, shaken, the flower slowly folding back into itself as if nothing had happened. For a long moment, neither speaks. The wild is silent, the pond glassy and still. The lesson is unspoken, but clear: the grove responds not to who they were in the city, but to who they are here, now—two lives bound, if only for a moment, by the will to save each other.

Their quarrel is not forgotten, but something between them has changed. The wild has mirrored their intent and forced them to see each other anew—not as enemies, but as equals facing the unknown together.

They sit in the mossy hush, hearts still pounding, the memory of panic lingering between them. Sienna's breath comes in shaky bursts, but her eyes—when she finally meets Abigail's—are steady with something new. Gratitude, yes, but also surprise. She never expected help from someone like Abigail. Abigail, for her part, feels an unfamiliar warmth in her chest—a quiet pride, and a dawning respect for the woman beside her.

No words are exchanged about what just happened. There's no need. In the city, Abigail might have turned away, letting pride or indifference decide Sienna's fate. Here, in the wild, stripped of all but their truest selves, she chose differently. Sienna knows it. Abigail knows it. And the wild, silent and impartial, knows it too.

They rise together, brushing moss and petals from their clothes, the old boundaries between them faded like a bad dream. The grove, once strange and threatening, now feels like a place of gentle parting—a witness to their transformation. The flowers sway softly, the pond glimmers, and the wild seems to offer a silent blessing as they make their way toward the edge of the trees.

They step from the grove side by side, neither leading nor following. The city waits somewhere beyond the tangled green, but it no longer defines them. They are not patron and vagabond, not rich and poor, not adversaries. Here, in the wild's memory, they are simply Abigail and Sienna—equal, whole, and perfect as they are.

As they walk, the sunlight breaks through the leaves and dances across their faces. For the first time, both women feel the simple, profound joy of existing—no masks, no hierarchy, just the freedom of being alive together.

Behind them, the wild closes gently, holding their story among its many secrets, ever ready to teach its subtle lessons.

## 5. A God no more.

I am the wild. I am the root and the river, the stone and the storm, the silence between heartbeats. I do not sleep. I do not judge. Whatever enters my embrace, I see.

Today, an old pilgrim comes. His hair is silver, his back gently bowed by years. His steps are careful, each one shaped by longing and memory. He brings offerings in his weathered hands and prayers woven from decades of hope and regret.

He believes I am a god. He kneels beneath my oldest tree, his voice trembling with the ache of years. He asks for favor, for forgiveness, for meaning. He waits for thunder, for miracles, for the voice of the divine. I give him only what I give all things: sunlight and shadow, the breath of wind, the quiet company of growing things.

He does not understand. Not yet. He will.

Day after day, he repeats his rituals. He lights candles, sings hymns, traces symbols in the dirt. He fasts, kneels, weeps. He asks for signs, for purpose, for peace. I offer him only what I offer all: the coolness of shade, the taste of wild berries, the sound of water over stone. His prayers vanish into the air, unacknowledged. His rituals pass like the footprints of deer—noticed by no one but himself.

He begins to falter. His voice grows hoarse, his words uncertain. At night, he looks to the stars and wonders if they are listening. He questions the silence, the absence of miracles. He wonders if his faith is not strong enough, if his offerings are unworthy, if I am displeased. But I am not displeased. I simply am.

He does not yet see the lesson in my silence. He does not yet understand the freedom in my silence—the gift I offer all who enter my wilds. So I watch. I wait. I let him wander, let him tire, let the questions bloom in his mind like wildflowers after rain.

The crisis comes as all storms do—sudden, fierce, and cleansing. One morning, the pilgrim rises and does not kneel. He stares at the offerings he has so carefully prepared and, with a trembling hand, sweeps them aside. His prayers die on his lips, replaced by a weary laugh.

“If you will not answer,” he says to the silent trees, “then I will not ask. If you are a god, you are a cruel one. And if you are not—then I am a fool.”

He turns his back on the altar of moss and stone. For the first time, he does not wait for a sign. He walks—at first in anger, then in emptiness, and finally, in a quiet that is not despair, but something new. Days pass. He stops counting them. He eats when he is hungry, drinks when he is thirsty, sleeps beneath the stars. He listens—not for a voice from above, but for the rustle of leaves, the call of distant birds, the rhythm of his own breath.

Gradually, my wild ceases to be a place of trial and becomes a place of being. The pilgrim learns to notice the small freedoms: the choice of which path to take, the pleasure of cool water, the simple joy of waking to sunlight. He laughs at his own clumsiness, marvels at the beauty he once overlooked. He no longer seeks approval, nor does he fear judgment. He is no longer a supplicant, but a participant—one life among many, shaping his own journey.

As the days slip by, his anger softens into acceptance. The ache for answers fades, replaced by a gentle curiosity. He explores not as a seeker of signs, but as one who simply wishes to see. He learns the names of flowers by their scent, the moods of the river by its song. He finds new paths, sometimes circling back, sometimes pressing on, never fearing to be lost. My wild is no longer a riddle to solve or a test to pass—it is a world to inhabit, moment by moment, breath by breath.

He notices how the fox moves through the undergrowth, unhurried and unafraid. How the trees grow not in rows, but in patterns older than memory. How the rain falls on all things equally, without favor or disdain. In this, he finds a peace deeper than any prayer. There is no need for worship, for there is nothing above or below—only the endless weaving of lives, each one perfect in its own way. He is not a pilgrim anymore, nor a supplicant. He is simply himself: alive, free, and enough.

One evening, as the sun sets in a blaze of gold and the air grows cool, the old man sits beneath the oldest tree. He feels the gentle ache of his body, the quiet fullness of his heart. He closes his eyes and breathes in the scent of earth and leaf, listening to the symphony of life around him. He knows, at last, that there are no gods here, only kin—each life sovereign, each path sacred, each moment a quiet miracle of freedom.

With a soft smile, he chooses his end—not in sorrow, but in gratitude. He lies down in the moss, feeling the heartbeat of the world beneath him. There is no fear, no regret. Only the peace of a story well-lived, and my gentle embrace, welcoming him home.

In that liminal space, as his breath slips quietly away, I greet him—not as something above or beyond, but as kin. I welcome him onto the earth, recognizing in him the perfection of equality, the dignity of a life lived and ended on his own terms. Here, there is no throne, no altar, no need for supplication. He is neither less nor more, but wholly himself—equal among equals, perfect in his being.

I am the wild. I do not command, nor do I obey. I simply live, and in living, I honor every ending as I honor every beginning. His journey is complete—not mourned, but celebrated. For in choosing his own end, and in being welcomed as kin, he has claimed the final freedom, and become, at last, wholly himself.